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The Kirkpatrick gap

WASHINGTON—In its chaotic bumble into Central America, the Reagan administration is swiftly digging itself a credibility gap, and it has given Jeane Kirkpatrick, our ambassador to the United Nations, the biggest shovel.

Kirkpatrick, the leading architect of U.S. policies in Central America, has taken to arguing with false facts, wild inaccuracies and McCarthyite insinuations. When she is caught, she blusters and filibusters, assuming the role of the imperious professor whom no mere student dare challenge.

On "Face the Nation" last Sunday, Kirkpatrick was especially blatant. She was asked about a House of Representatives vote to cut off all aid to right-wing Nicaraguan guerrillas. She pounced on the question.

"You know I'm really glad you mentioned that vote," Kirkpatrick said. "I was hoping that vote would come up today, because I think that it was a very important vote, and I think that the most important aspects of it have not in fact been focused on by the media treatment of the vote."

What the Congress had done, Kirkpatrick explained, was cut off the aid only for 30 days. Covert U.S. aid to

the right-wing "contra" guerrillas would resume if the Nicaraguan government continued to aid left-wing guerrillas in El Salvador.

CBS correspondent Robert Schakne objected: "The House seemed to be saying, 'Stop paying money for this particular kind of military pressure.'"

Kirkpatrick blustered: "But that isn't at all what the House said, you know. I suggest that you should look at what the House said. I don't think many people have looked at what the House said, and I don't think many people have even listened to what Majority Leader Jim Wright said, when he said what is it that this amendment does."

Golly. Seems like the professor caught us with our homework undone. But let's "look at what the House said," as Kirkpatrick suggests. The amendment proposed by Democratic Majority Leader Jim Wright of Texas and approved 228-195, says: "None of the funds appropriated for fiscal year 1983 or 1984 for the Central Intelligence Agency or any other department, agency, or entity of the United States involved in intelligence activities may be obligated or expended for the purpose of which would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement or individual." Nothing about 30 days. Nothing about a resumption.

"There is no doubt that on that point she was wrong," an aide said yesterday. "It was regrettable."

The previous week, Kirkpatrick dismayed members of the intelligence community by inflating the

numbers of Cuban and Soviet advisers in Nicaragua. There had been "a substantial increase in the last few weeks," she said, and the number of Cuban troops was continuing to grow.

Not so, says a senior intelligence official. There has been no increase above the previously stated figure of 2,000 Cuban military advisers in Nicaragua. "We sort of resent that she is using these intelligence figures for political purposes," he said. When a reporter asked her to document her information, she said she didn't trust the CIA for figures; she preferred to rely on the local press—in Honduras.

Last May, she told an Argentine correspondent that some unnamed members of Congress "do not approve of our efforts to consolidate the constitutional government of El Salvador and . . . would actually like to see the Marxist forces take power in that country."

AN OUTRAGED Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.) and 13 other congressmen challenged her to name names or apologize. She has never answered their letter, Ackerman said yesterday.

What is especially dangerous about Kirkpatrick is that her misinformation is this administration's substitute for a reasoned, prudent foreign policy. Intelligence that runs counter to her instincts is discarded. Professionals who know the subject matter are fired.

Foreign policy is concocted by a group of blustering amateurs, sitting in a White House basement and trying to out-tough each other. We had that in Vietnam, and it was a prescription for disaster.